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SUBJECT: Serbia and Montenegro Reaction to Rugova Death

SUMMARY

1.(U) Though anticipated, the death of Kosovar President Ibrahim Rugova from lung cancer on Saturday January 21 has garnered widespread media speculation about Rugova's successor and how his passing will affect the Kosovo status negotiations. With the notable exception of PM Kostunica, Serbian leaders have issued generally dignified condolence statements, and President Tadic has publicly announced that he has sought approval from the United Nations Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) to attend the funeral. END SUMMARY.

CONDOLENCES

2.(U) As of Monday January 23, all major Serbian leaders with the notable exception of PM Kostunica had issued statements of condolence. Serbian President Boris Tadic said he respected Rugova as a politician, and that his death was a loss for the Albanians of Kosovo. He also said he hopes Rugova's death will not hurt efforts to find a peaceful solution for the future status of Kosovo through compromise. (note: Tadic also framed his condolences within the context of his self-declared responsibilities as President of all of Serbia, including Kosovo. see below) Serbia and Montenegro President Svetozar Marovic said that "Rugova was known and respected as a proponent of peaceful means in the achievement of political goals." He added that he hopes Rugova's style of politics will continue to dominate among politicians in Kosovo and the province's interim government institutions. Foreign Minister Vuk Draskovic announced that he asked SRSG Jessen-Petersen to convey his condolences to Rugova's family Kosovo PM Bajram Kosumi and Assembly President Daci. Montenegro's Prime Minister and President both sent letters of condolence to Kosovo Premier Bajram Kosumi.

PREDICTIONS

3.(U) A somewhat discordant public statement came from the president of the Kosovo Coordination Center, Sanda Raskovic-Ivic. She told the media she feared Rugova's successor could go about seeking statehood for Kosovo in a much more aggressive manner. Singling out Rugova as the only leader other than Veton Surroi who used peaceful means to achieve his goals, she said, "I am afraid that Ibrahim Rugova's spot could be taken by an individual whose method of operation will be military action, open aggression that could lead to unwanted events, bloodshed, conflict, or at the very least incidents in Kosovo and Metohija."

4.(SBU) Members of the Serbian negotiating team for Kosovo status gave their private reaction to Rugova's death during a luncheon hosted by the DCM for visiting EUR/SCE Deputy Director. Tadic and Kostunica advisors Leon Kojen and Slobodan Samardzic believed that Assembly President Nexhat Daci would serve at least as Acting President for a significant period. Given the political complications of electing a successor to Rugova, Daci represented the path of least resistance, since Rugova's Democratic Alliance of Kosovo (LDK) party would likely want to hold on to the presidency. The advisors did not express serious concerns about the possibility of a Daci presidency, though they believed he would be less flexible than Rugova on decentralization. Raskovic-Ivic and others noted that Fatmir Limaj, recently acquitted by the ICTY on charges of war crimes, was gaining support. She echoed her public comments that Rugova was the only Kosovo politician who had not resorted to violent means to achieve his goals, adding that the choice of a successor would be a clear signal to Belgrade about whether the Albanians intended to cooperate in the final status discussion. All of the advisors said they hoped the Vienna decentralization discussion which had been scheduled for January 25, would get underway soon.

TADIC ASKS UNMIK TO ATTEND

5.(U) On January 23, President Tadic sent a letter to SRSG Soren Jessen-Petersen asking for assistance for Tadic to attend Rugova's funeral. He simultaneously gave an interview to Beta news agency explaining his reasons for wanting to attend the funeral. In the statement, Tadic said, "Common courtesy dictates that the president of Serbia should travel to Kosovo, which is a part of the territory of this country and its integrity, to pay due

respect to the political representatives of the Albanian people." Tadic said also that he wanted to demonstrate that Serbia is "prepared to face in a European way, the political plans of those have different and opposing ideas, emphasizing, that "I will not be the president of one little xenophobic country, frightened of the world, but of an open European, prosperous country which communicates with the world and gives respect even to those which have different political opinions."

6.(SBU) The Belgrade UN office told us they had forwarded the letter to Pristina, and that UNMIK would contact the Rugova family to seek approval for Tadic to attend. The office was skeptical, however, that the family would approve, particularly because Tadic's statement may be interpreted as political.

COMMENT

7.(SBU) We should not dismiss President Tadic's impulse to attend the Rugova funeral as a reflexive effort to assert Serb sovereignty over Kosovo. While this is clearly a factor in his move, the fact that he did this for his domestic constituency should not overshadow the more important potential conciliatory nature of such a gesture.
END COMMENT.

POLT